

“Follow the Star”  
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The First Sunday after Epiphany  
January 8, 2017

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” – Matthew 2:10

If there is a lovelier story in the Bible than the account of the visitors to the Christ child, I don't know where you'd find it. One commentator simply calls it “sublime.” We commonly call it the story of the three wise men, but that's an interpretation on our part, because the story itself doesn't tell us how many visitors there were and it doesn't say that they were men; they could have been queens instead of kings – Solomon, after all, was visited by the Queen of Sheba – and tradition puts the number at three because of the three gifts that are mentioned, but there could have been a dozen visitors or twenty-three or forty-three of them. But three will do for the purposes of the story.

Matthew, who's our only source for this beautiful story, calls the visitors *magoi*, which we lift almost directly into English as magi, which is the root of our word “magician.” And that's what the word means in Acts, chapter eight, where a magician named Simon had held the people of the city of Samaria in his thrall by his magic tricks. And they are tricks, of course, as all magic is, and Simon is a fake, as so many faith-healers and false prophets have been over the centuries. But there has never been a shortage of people so desperate to change their circumstances that they become vulnerable to charismatic people who will exploit and manipulate them.

“All of them,” Acts 8:10 says of the people of Samaria, “from the least to the greatest, listened to [Simon] eagerly, saying, 'This man is the Great Power of God.’” Whatever Simon did – and it's certain that it was letting people see what they wanted to see or hear what they wanted to hear or think what they wanted to think – whatever it was, he convinced people that he was the real deal, and they, in turn, literally fell under his spell. And all such manipulative and unscrupulous people as Simon are after three things: wealth, power, and fame. And the story in Acts is meant to warn us to be on our guard against all those who would claim to save us by enslaving us to their smooth words and their sleights of hand and their enthusiastic followers. When people claim that they have power that no one else possesses, and that they will exercise that power on our behalf if only we'll give them our money or do what they tell us to do or step in line with their program, we should be very, very cautious.

But the *magoi* in the story of the infant Christ appear to be cut from entirely different cloth. Here the Greek word, which comes ultimately from an Old Persian word, probably refers to a member of a hereditary priestly class among the ancient Medes and Persians. These *magoi* aren't calling attention to themselves at all. They aren't asking anything of the baby or of his parents. They ask King Herod for no reward or position in his administration because of their achievement of locating the Christ child.

Instead, they do one thing and one thing only, and that is they pay homage to the Christ, to the Messiah, to God's Anointed One. They recognize, unlike Herod, that this baby is different from all others. This is the child for whom so many people have been waiting, the genuine article, the real

deal, the one promised of God and envisioned by prophets.

By presenting their gifts, the visitors say to this baby, You matter to us. You are important to us. With these gifts, we are forming bonds of loyalty and responsibility between us. We are acknowledging a relationship that will have consequences in both of our lives from this point forward.

That's what couples say to each other on their wedding day with the exchange of the gift of wedding rings, and that's what the visitors from the east were saying with their gifts to Jesus of Nazareth.

And that, according to Matthew, is one of the things that made them wise. They were wise enough to see that the true king of the Jews – not Herod, the Jewish puppet-king of his Roman overlords, but the son of Mary and Joseph – is the baby who will grow up to teach and live a life of loving self-sacrifice for others. Those *magoi* were wise enough to see that the power that would ultimately claim the allegiance of millions of ordinary women and men across cultures and centuries was not the power of the insiders – the Herods and the Caesars Augustus and the Pontius Pilates and the Simon Maguses and all the rest of the great and the good who sought then and seek now to preserve their power and privilege and control through the exercise of force and manipulation and exploitation – but rather was the power that God grants to the outsiders, those who can see the world for what it truly is and can speak truth to power. That's what it means to follow the star that leads to the Christ.

And that's why that star is important. It's the star that leads not to grossly inflated compensation packages and corner offices and cabinet posts, but rather to the one who gave his life for many and thereby showed us how to live. To trust that his way is the way is not to put down the religions of others who are sincerely seeking God; it is, rather, to confront the relentless, insatiable appetite of the ego that perpetually demands our allegiance, and to live as though we believe that we find our lives by losing them. That's such a radical idea it's completely weird in the marketplace of today's ideas, and it always has been. And that's what makes the church weird and that's what we need to preserve if we want to live faithfully as a church. “Those who want to save their lives,” Jesus said, “will lose them. But those who lose their lives for me will find them” (Mt. 16:25, God's Word Translation). That's the purest form of the gospel I know, and what the world will never understand is that it really is what the word “gospel” means – it really is good news. That's where that star ultimately leads – it leads to the good news of eternal life.

I want to close this morning by referring to an article that appeared a while back in *The Washington Post* and which our church council discussed at its annual retreat this past weekend. It was written by Rachel Held Evans, a 35-year-old Christian writer whose e-book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, reached the 2012 New York Times bestseller list for non-fiction.

The article she wrote for *The Washington Post* was brought to our attention by Mike Nedrow, and it bears the headline, “Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make the church 'cool.'” Held Evans says that for millennials like her, who once went to church, who left the church, and then who have found their way back to the church, what drew them back was not slick marketing or gimmicks or give-aways; rather, it was classic, straight-up Christianity. Research on the age cohort of which Held Evans is a member found that 67 percent of millennials prefer a “classic” church over a “trendy” one, and 77 percent of that group prefer to worship in a “sanctuary” rather than an “auditorium.” Millennials, she writes, increasingly resist, “exclusive, close-minded religious communities masquerading as the hip new places in town,” and here's another quote you need to hear from this thirty-something public religious figure: “If young people are looking for congregations

that authentically practice the teachings of Jesus in an open and inclusive way, then the good news is the church already knows how to do that. The trick isn't to make church cool; it's to keep worship weird."

We're about to do just that. In a few minutes, we'll come to Christ's table to celebrate – and that's the verb we use for communion, "celebrate" – the good news that the one who gave his life for us now gives his new life to us and so gives life to the world through us. Listen carefully to the communion liturgy – you all have the whole thing in front of you, so you can follow along, and some of you, I learned at MLC's retreat, actually have parts of the liturgy memorized – listen carefully, and you'll hear that this central act of the Christian church defines us, nourishes us, and supports us in our work in God's world. It helps us to follow the star.